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ABSTRACT

Employer attitudes toward youth, the youth labor market, and prospects for a national system of youth apprenticeships were studied through a survey of firms that had participated in local youth apprenticeship or cooperative education programs in seven U.S. cities and focus group discussions with small and large employers in eight U.S. communities. The studies established that the period between completing school and obtaining a good job is getting longer, the link between formal schooling and work is becoming more tenuous, and employers (especially small firms) are generally wary of any policy initiative designed to encourage the hiring and training of new workers. Employers were reluctant to initiate youth apprenticeship programs given the present labor surplus/job shortage. They generally felt that youths lack discipline, good work attitudes, and communication skills and that schools do not prepare youth for employment. Screening was employers' dominant concern regarding participation in a youth apprenticeship program. Focusing national attention on the absence of good jobs for young people and emphasizing flexibility in any policies developed were concluded to be the keys to improving the school-to-work transition. (MN)

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What Employers Want: Employer Perspectives on Youth, the Youth Labor Market, and Prospects for a National System of Youth Apprenticeships

by

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What Employers Want: Employer Perspectives on Youth, the Youth Labor Market, and Prospects for a National System of Youth Apprenticeships

Since the New Deal, public policy has tended to be cyclical—periods of initiative followed by intervals of reaction and consolidation. With the arrival of the Clinton Administration, the nation has again entered a time of public initiative: the triad of issues defined in the 1992 presidential election—the budget deficit, health care reform, and the quality of the workforce—have become the centerpieces of an administration program that proposes once again to use the offices of government to redirect the economy and recast the climate for providing social services.

My concern in this paper is with the third of these issues—the capacity of American institutions, principally schools and businesses, to educate, train, and productively employ American workers. To a remarkable extent, the issue has been subsumed by a single phrase—"America's Choice: High Skills or Low Wages!" The national report which took that syllogism as its title, giving it the force of a political slogan, argued that Americans were falling behind in the race to create jobs of the kind that produced both individual and national wealth. Schools were failing to teach the skills that increasingly would matter. Firms were neither creating enough high-skilled jobs nor supplying the kind of continuous training that a skilled workforce required. As a consequence, the nation's standard of living and its capacity to sustain itself as an economic power were increasingly at risk. The most cogent form of this argument was advanced by Robert Reich, now Secretary of Labor, whose book, *The Work of Nations*, set much of the tone for candidate Bill Clinton's economic platform. Reich supplied the best summation of what would become the winning argument:

> As almost every factor of production—money, technology, factories, and equipment—moves effortlessly across borders, the very idea of an American economy is becoming meaningless, as are the notions of an American corporation, American capital, American products, and American technology. A similar transformation is affecting every other nation, some faster and more profoundly than others. . . .
>
> So who is "us"? The answer lies in the only aspect of a national economy that is relatively immobile internationally: the American work force, the American people. The real economic challenge facing the United States in the years ahead—the same as that facing every other nation—is to increase the potential value of what its citizens can add to the global economy, by enhancing their skills and capacities and by improving their means of linking those skills and capacities to the world market.[1]

What we are learning is just how difficult it is to translate this argument into effective policy, despite the general consensus that Reich is right—that the quality of the workforce is both a legitimate and necessary focus for national policy. What the subject lacks is the political drama of the battle of the budget and the political saliency of health care reform, in which most of the populace can see themselves as both victims and potential beneficiaries. It is an issue without a partisan edge; regardless which party won the 1992 election, the resulting administration would have put forward workforce policies built largely on the same premises. Unlike health care reform, the notion that there has been a steady erosion in the quality and competitiveness of the American workforce excites little debate or sense of crisis. People worry about jobs without thinking very much about the economy's structural deficits. When jobs are lost or young people fail to find a place in the labor force, the demand is for immediate amelioration, not a program designed to fix the system.

The result is that the search for an effective labor force policy suffers in the competition for national attention. A case in point is the campaign for a national program of youth apprenticeships, roughly modeled after the German system, in which as many as a third of the nation's high school juniors would complete their degrees by mixing in-school instruction and on-the-job training under the tutelage of an employer-mentor. What was being proposed was a national strategy both for making schools more work-relevant and for ensuring the nation a continuing supply of well-trained workers. As such, youth apprenticeships came to exemplify what was meant by a national strategy for making critical investments in the educational quality of the workforce. Pilot programs were started, good-citizen employers were recruited, and both presidential campaigns made the idea an integral part of their proposed education and labor policies.

The bill the administration sent to Congress in August 1993, however, did not propose a national system of youth apprenticeships, reflecting the administration's and Congress' reluctance to establish the kind of categorical grant program that initiative would have required. Instead, the administration's program relied principally on bringing greater coordination to already funded initiatives that focused on the youth labor market in general and the school-to-work transition in particular. A premium was placed on planning and experimentation by the states, with most of the new funding proposed by the administration going to state planning grants.

This recasting of the youth apprenticeship initiative contains two important lessons for anyone interested in forging a national policy for investing in the quality of the workforce. The first lesson is an old one: new programs run the risk of disturbing established interests—and in the field of labor policy that means organized labor. Arguing that the proposal undermined the registered apprenticeship programs operated by traditional craft and manufacturing unions, organized labor made clear that it could not support the idea of youth apprenticeships as put forward during the presidential campaign.

The second lesson was the realization that, in the end, it was easier to promote school reform than to change either the nature of the workplace or the quality of the workforce. In the decade since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* and its charge that American schools were responsible for a rising tide of mediocrity, there has emerged a clear and sustaining commitment to school reform, including national standards that focus attention on educational outcomes rather than educa-

tional processes. Given the public's interest, even preoccupation, with primary and secondary schools, youth apprenticeships were often presented as an important lever for making education more relevant—a way of using the promise of a good job to make school more important to the large numbers of students who really did not plan to go to college and, as a consequence, more or less drifted through high school. The presumption was that such students did not make very good workers because they lacked the discipline and motivation as well as job skills most employers sought—and that, importantly, those skills were something schools in partnerships with employers could teach. The administration's school-to-work transition kept the rationale without the connection to the private sector that a full program of youth apprenticeships promised.

These were lessons largely learned inside the Beltway as the administration shaped its school-to-work initiatives. Beyond Washington there is a third lesson to be learned about what will and will not work as the nation seeks ways of investing in the educational quality of its workforce. Over the last year the National Center on the Educational Quality of the Workforce (EQW) has been conducting a series of studies and analyses focusing on the youth labor market. In part we have sought to sum up what is already known about youth who work; in part the research has focused on the relationship between the attributes of individual schools and the success of their graduates in the labor market; and in part the analyses have sought to document the labor market churning caused by the struggle of young workers to win permanent jobs with good prospects and adequate benefits.

Two of the Center's studies were designed to test more directly the feasibility of a national system of youth apprenticeships. One study, conducted jointly by the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) and EQW, surveyed firms that had participated in local youth apprenticeship or cooperative education programs in seven cities—Atlanta, GA; Harrisburg, PA; Indianapolis, IN; Phoenix, AZ; Pittsburgh, PA; Portland, OR; and York, PA. The second study conducted focus groups of both large and small employers in eight communities—Atlanta, GA; Cleveland, OH; Eugene, OR; Indianapolis, IN; Ithaca, NY; Phoenix, AZ; Pittsburgh, PA; and Portland, OR—to test which incentives might encourage employers to participate in youth apprenticeship programs.

What the studies collectively tell us is just how difficult the transition from school to work has become. The time between the conclusion of schooling and the obtainment of a good job is getting longer; the link between formal schooling and work is becoming more tenuous; and in today's economic climate employers in general, and small firms in particular, are likely to be wary of any policy initiative designed to encourage the hiring and training of young workers.

This last conclusion is drawn principally from our focus groups. Each was comprised of between seven and twenty representatives of larger firms or the owners of small businesses invited by a local sponsoring agency. Each discussion lasted two hours, used the same basic script, and the same interlocutor. Knowing we could not ensure a random population of respondents, we sought instead to skew the sample in favor of employers likely to respond favorably to workforce initiatives. All of the eight communities had reputations as "can-do" cities and towns—communities with effective leaders, successful business-school partnerships, and community organizations with proven track records. The participant lists as well as the invitations came

from these organizations. While we asked each organization to draw a representative sample of employers from their communities, we understood they would more than likely draw on firms and small businesses with which they had worked in the past—in effect, we stacked the deck in favor of good news.

The discussions themselves were remarkably similar across the focus groups, differing principally in emphasis and, perhaps surprisingly, emotional level. The problem on which each of the focus groups stumbled was the same: as employers they saw themselves as necessary participants in, but not necessarily as beneficiaries of, the proposed initiative. Four basic insights emerged from these discussions.

"What this country needs is a first-class labor shortage."

The cities in our sample can be roughly arrayed along a single continuum, with Atlanta at one end and Pittsburgh at the other. The cities differ in terms of the age of their respective workforces, the level of concentration in the manufacturing sector, and the tightness of their labor markets. Even for the most optimistic of the communities, Atlanta and Phoenix, it would be hard to overstate the chilling effect that the current absence of labor demand had on our discussions. Among the participants from large firms, particularly in the older cities experiencing the greatest downsizing of large-scale manufacturing enterprises, there was a note of gallows humor—firms that had not hired since 1990; enterprises that had halved their workforces in the last five years; established companies on the verge of bankruptcy. A decade earlier these would have been the firms asked to initiate a program of youth apprenticeships; in those days, the employers probably would have complied because it was good for the community, whether or not it was also good for business—but not today. As organizations, these large firms were concerned principally with maintaining and retraining the workers they retained. They openly worried that newly hired young people might be victimized by older workers who feared for their own jobs.

Most of the representatives from the larger firms were human resource professionals, committed to skills training and familiar with the German system of youth apprenticeships. Many were persuaded that, in the long term, their firms would have to draw on the skills of a rising generation of young workers. But for the moment—perhaps the next five years or more—they expressed little interest in any initiative that detracted energy and attention from the immediate task of making their enterprises more competitive: leaner, more focused, less engaged in community projects.

The small-business owners faced a different but related challenge. While they were still hiring, they saw little need to engage in the extensive training of young people—not when there were so many older, more disciplined, better-skilled workers in search of jobs. None reported skill shortages; none indicated that they were paying premium wages to get the kind of workers they wanted. Some saw in youth apprenticeships a chance to recruit young people to their trades and professions; others allowed that they would like to do their part to smooth the way for young people entering the labor market. They did not indicate, however, that a steady, stable supply of apprenticeships could contribute to their economic success.

A tighter labor market, no doubt, would change most of these perceptions. When pushed, most small business owners as well as the representatives of major employers remembered earlier times when jobs went begging, largely because there were in fact shortages of

skilled applicants. With some nostalgia they recalled earlier efforts to fill the gap through remedial training programs and expanded recruiting efforts. Most allowed that if those times returned, they might have more economic interest in a program of youth apprenticeships—but then few could really imagine a return to those days, the large firms having learned the discipline of restructuring and the small businesses having discovered the advantages of hiring experienced workers.

"I'm here—make it happen!"

The most discouraging discussions within the focus groups occurred when we asked about the employability of young people. In part, the employers' laments incorporated the perennial concerns of older people for a generation that must inevitably replace them: young people lack discipline; they expect to be catered to; they don't want to do the dirty jobs; they don't respect authority. To these more or less traditional concerns were added worries about the quality of educational attainment: young people lack communication skills; they are neither numerate nor literate; they can't make change; they don't understand the importance of providing customer service.

These complaints were more than a fashionable echoing of the media's current fascination with educational deficiencies. Almost everyone had a story to tell—dealing with honors students who couldn't spell; sifting through literally hundreds of job applications and resumes in search of potential candidates capable of making a reasonably neat and complete presentation of their skills and aptitudes; firing one young worker after another who simply didn't measure up once on the job. The owner of one fast-food franchise reported that the average tenure of a first-time young worker was less than two weeks; often the owner would make up to eight hires before finding a new worker who could last longer. Apocryphal or not, her tale brought a flood of similar stories, ending with one employer's praise for older women as part-time workers.

The more a focus group told stories about young people, the more it became apparent just how much antipathy, bordering on out-right hostility, separated the employing and rising generations. Some of the participants became openly angry—at the lack of discipline and self-control, at the need for instant gratification, at the lack of moral fiber, or (to use the term that became the focus groups' watchword) at the near absence of anything resembling a work ethic. These were not friendly conversations but confessions: what the employers wanted to see in young people and what they actually got were largely irreconcilable.

While only half of the sessions involved out-and-out youth bashing, there was in the others a clear sense that the respondents wanted to distance themselves from the members of their children's generation. Young workers were viewed as overly concerned with entitlements and insufficiently interested in proving their mettle. The most common story told across the focus groups was of the young worker who expected to start at the top: "I'm here—make it happen!"

"What I want in a new worker no high school can supply—a twenty-six-year-old with three previous employers."

Not surprisingly, school systems in general and high schools in particular came in for the same kind of battering. There were stories of high schools that couldn't or wouldn't respond; that didn't know how to work with business; that were dismissive of the students who didn't want to go to college; that used their vocational programs as dumping grounds; that misled their stu-

dents by not stressing that holding on to a job was serious business. When hiring a young worker, most employers did not bother asking for a high school transcript, simply because "we wouldn't believe what the school was telling us."

Yet to dwell on the reports of school failings would be to miss the point. Most employers were no longer expecting high schools to supply their future workers. With the exception of fast-food franchises, businesses were finding the most likely pool of youth labor not among high school students but among college students, even college graduates. Child labor laws were seen as discouraging the hiring of anyone under the age of eighteen; and why bother with a nineteen- or twenty-year-old when there were so many "older" young workers available? The firms and businesses represented in our focus groups did know about their local community colleges—had a good sense of what they offered and who to talk to if one needed training for current employees or wanted to tap a supply of new workers. Put off by the young, saddened by their local high schools but not much interested in changing them, most of the employers with whom we talked had simply shifted their attention to the next age cohort, focusing on those in their early- and mid-twenties and concentrating on the educational institutions they attended.

The focus groups also suggested additional ways that employers have adapted to compensate for the lack of effective high schools. One of the more interesting expedients was to use temporary employment agencies as a source of new workers. The first time this issue surfaced in a focus group we almost missed its importance. It was not that the firm wanted to "try-out" its prospective workers by hiring them first from a temp agency and then offering permanent positions to the most successful temps. Rather, the firm wanted to know if prospective applicants had ever worked for a tempagency. If there was a positive response, the temp agency was called as a reference capable of answering three questions. Did the applicant have a good attendance record? Did the applicant have word-processing or other computer skills? Had the applicant passed a drug test? About one-third of the small-business owners in our focus groups reported using temp agencies in precisely this way—as a reliable means of screening potential applicants.

Sometimes the youth labor market itself performed the screening function that high schools might have been expected to provide. Employers in one community reported their sense of a hierarchy of part-time jobs for young people. At the bottom were the fast-food franchises, paying minimum wage. Next followed retail jobs, offering on the average $1.00 an hour more. At the top of the scale were specialty jobs, often in the community's hotel and resort industry, that were worth an additional dollar an hour. What employers with permanent jobs to offer wanted to see was an ordered progression through this job train—evidence that the applicant had successfully acquired job skills.

Usually, however, most of the employers, both large and small, reported that the best screening criterion was simply age. Given the surplus of younger people looking for work, the employers had little trouble finding "older" young workers, frequently individuals with two or more years of college, or four or more years of military service. They were pictured as the survivors—those with sufficient discipline, skills, and motivation to be worth hiring. After more than twenty minutes of sustained high-school bashing in one focus group, the human resource manager of a middle-sized manufacturing concern called the conversation to a halt, observing: "I am not a great fan of our local high schools.

But what I want in a new worker no high school can supply—a twenty-six-year-old with three previous employers."

"You screen them, I'll pick them."

When employers were asked specifically about their willingness to participate in a youth apprenticeship program, the dominant concern was screening. Not really trusting the high schools, reluctant to invest their own time and energy in choosing the applicants, the employers wanted a simple, reliable means of evaluating candidates. In a number of the focus groups, job aptitude and "practical" achievement tests were put forward as favored screening mechanisms.

Once screened, eligible applicants would then have to be interviewed. There was little inclination to let the schools assign students to apprenticeships. Since most of the participants in our focus groups were accustomed to interviewing 10 or more applicants per job, they assumed that a comparable oversupply of applicants would be necessary for apprenticeships. In one of the later focus groups, we specifically asked if the employers meant they wanted a program that was "highly selective," in much the same way that the best colleges and universities practiced "selective admissions." The answer was, "yes," and the discussion that followed suggested that this group of employers saw in youth apprenticeships a limited set of opportunities for a relatively small proportion of a high school class.

Most of the employers in our focus groups showed little interest in the mechanics of a youth apprenticeship program. When asked to comment on the kinds of rules and procedures they would require, most talked about the need for flexibility and the perils of red tape. When asked about the regulatory climate, at least one employer in each focus group mentioned the need to change child-labor laws, principally to allow students to work longer hours later into the evening. A few, particularly those who had either participated in programs for disadvantaged youth or had experienced difficulty finding acceptable low-wage employees in a tight labor market, talked about the need for wage supplements, although none volunteered that paying less than the minimum wage was an acceptable alternative. When asked about tax credits, most focus groups expressed reservations; the credits were seen as too uncertain, too likely to involve more red tape. One approach the participants definitely did not favor was a "play or pay" scheme or a mandatory minimum "training tax." Most of the large firms thought their accountants were clever enough to document the minimum required expense on training; the smaller firms were simply angered by the idea.

Concern about the often negative tone of the first focus groups led us to review our procedures and selection criteria. Was there something in the way the focus groups were conducted that invited complaints about young people and schools? Was there an unintended selection bias—only employers who were angry or had complaints accepted our invitation? In the middle of this review, one of the cities reported that there would be insufficient attendance to justify holding the two focus groups that had been scheduled. When asked why they would not attend, most employers had given one of two answers: youth apprenticeships were associated with unions and therefore the firm was not interested; or the firm never hired young people and therefore would not have much to contribute to the discussion.

We judged the latter explanation to be a more passive confirmation of the principal lessons we were drawing from the focus groups: there is little demand

for additional youth labor, little enthusiasm for engaging the young, and even less interest in establishing partnerships with high schools. The inclination of those employers who chose to participate in the focus groups would be to establish small, selective programs in which applicants were screened and tested by another agency before being interviewed and selected by the employer.

Where Do We Go from Here?

It is interesting to compare the focus group findings with those from our parallel survey of employers in five communities (Atlanta, GA; Portland, OR; Phoenix, AZ; Indianapolis, IN; and Pittsburgh, PA—along with York, and Harrisburg, PA) who had participated either in a pilot youth apprenticeship program or in a cooperative learning program. While the focus groups indicate that most employers will likely prove wary of any national program of youth apprenticeships attached to public high schools, the telephone survey of employers who actually have been engaged in such a program told a different story. These employers, almost exclusively small-business owners and operators, reported that they were generally pleased with their youth apprentices and interns, that they found the program beneficial to themselves as well as to the student-worker, and most importantly that they would sign up again and recommend participation to other small-business owners.

The reconciliation of these opposing points of view resembles a modern version of that old Alkaselzer slogan, "Try it, you'll like it." The challenge, put most simply, lies in getting small businesses in sufficient numbers to "try out" youth apprenticeships. In the last of our focus groups and in discussions with civic leaders intrigued by the thrust of our findings, we began to explore quite explicitly what would be necessary to convince small businesses to take the lead in their communities by participating in the creation of youth apprenticeships. What would it take to move beyond the current pattern in which participants are largely recruited one business at a time, each agreeing to take a single apprentice or youth intern? Out of these discussions—and with a particular bow to the participants in the Atlanta focus groups and the members of an EQW-sponsored roundtable in Cleveland—we have developed the outlines of what it might take to bring these businesses to the table.

Define the Problem. The tenor of the focus groups make clear that the problem is neither a shortage of skilled workers nor a more broadly perceived decline in the educational quality of the workforce. Not even the poor performance of the schools, while widely commented upon, was seen as the principal issue. Rather, there was a clear sense that what needed fixing was the absence of real jobs for young people—and, not so coincidentally, their lack of preparation for and appreciation of work itself.

What the focus groups and related discussions reflected was a broad, largely intuitive understanding that the path by which youth enter the labor market and become workers is becoming increasingly rocky. In each of the cities in which we conducted focus groups, the proportion of the population in high school was actually quite small; the proportion of students in middle and junior high school was substantially larger. Given these demographics and the attitudes of the employers in our focus groups, these younger cohorts will likely have even fewer employment opportunities, face greater skepticism on the part of the adult employing community, and increasingly see themselves trapped in educational institutions most employers dismiss as unlikely suppliers of skilled workers. The pressures to

attend college will increase, although there is little evidence to suggest that the number of jobs requiring a college education will increase at the same rate.

It is in this context that the phrase, "school-to-work transition" becomes something of a misnomer. The data on labor market churning demonstrate that the important transitions are from no work to some work, from part-time to full-time employment, from temporary jobs without benefits and prospects to good jobs that provide both. Most of the employers in our focus groups relied on this job churning to help screen new hires. They wanted to see a series of jobs on the applicant's resume. Some checked to see if the applicant was progressing up the pay scale—if he or she had graduated to jobs that paid more than the minimum wage. Most of all, the employers wanted proof that applicants were employable, that they previously had been hired and retained by another firm.

Focusing on the "school-to-work transition" in fact masks the real nature of the problem: the declining number of good jobs for young, first-time workers. The focus on schooling, rather than jobs, also reflects the dilemma confronted by both employers and policy makers, because it is difficult to provide opportunities for future workers when the prospects of established employees have become so uncertain. The severity of this potential competition between generations was suggested by a story told at our first focus group in Portland, Oregon. The participants were chief human resource and personnel officers of middle-sized, mostly manufacturing firms. Midway through the session, the participants were asked: Who do young people have to compete with in their search for good jobs? When you want to hire a new worker, where are you most likely to look? The first answer was the expected one: among the skilled workers laid off by the wood products industry. The second answer was devastating: among the growing number of public school teachers laid off due to the roll-back of state taxes. They had all the attributes these firms wanted—evidence of successful job performance; good verbal and adequate math skills; and good people skills. When teachers end up competing with their own students for good jobs, the seed of a national crisis has already been sown.

Focus National Attention. It is this impending conflict that is largely absent from the national discussion of youth apprenticeships and their link to school reform. To the extent that our focus groups were representative of employer attitudes, the current focus on how and why schools have failed to prepare youth for the labor market will generate neither passion nor sufficient energy to overcome the employers' inherent wariness toward federal initiatives—particularly when costs seem high and benefits are uncertain. When asked directly what it would take to make the case for federal action, the most consistent response was "focus national attention on the real problem—the continued absence of good jobs for young people." There was a sense that neither this administration nor its predecessor had made job opportunities for the young an integral part of the national agenda. For focus group employers, the current mode of discussing workforce issues appeared to be far off the mark: too concerned with how the system did and did not work, too cerebral, and, in that sense, detached.

What most focus group participants wanted to hear was a clear call to action, a succinctly defined problem matched by solutions that were equally well-understood. The Atlanta focus group—consisting mainly of large employers and in many ways the most optimistic of the ten sessions we conducted—frankly stated that the President needed to mount the "bully pulpit"—to

capture national attention for this issue as he had for health care reform. What the issue lacks, they argued, was the sense of urgency that only the President could lend it.

Several of the focus groups spent substantial time discussing the military as a training ground for good workers, which led us to speculate whether reduced opportunities for young people in general and the non-college-bound in particular would accompany the downsizing of the military. With new accessions by the armed services cut in half, reduced from 200,000 to 100,000 new recruits each year, there will be that many fewer good jobs available to the young—fewer opportunities to gain skills, to demonstrate their capacity for work, and to earn the educational vouchers that may in fact be the real advantage that military service bestows. Asking "Who will replace the military as a prime trainer of and investor in the young?" is the kind of question that can help shift attention away from the mechanics of proposed initiatives and towards a discussion of the real need to secure for young people the opportunity to procure a job that pays well, has benefits, and most importantly holds the promise of future advancement.

Prove More Flexible. The omnibus bill put forward by the administration to improve the "school-to-work transition" provides an important first step in broadening the kinds of programs and initiatives that the White House believes deserve support. The bill does not call for a national system of youth apprenticeships but rather fosters continued experimentation, principally by states, with programs that better link schools and the workplace. Based on the results of our focus groups and related research, we would argue that still greater flexibility ought to be considered—the kind of flexibility that neither ties the proposed initiative to school reform nor insists that schools play a role in each of the programs. From our focus group discussions, we have culled a set of additional initiatives that might be included in such a broadening of a national policy to explore the need to create more and better jobs for young people.

The use of performance in the youth labor market, rather than performance in school, to evaluate an applicant's employability suggests that making the youth labor market itself more rational and supportive of young people's ambitions might be an important aspect of public policy. It is this role that the military once played—offering purposeful employment, along with training and credentialing, to young people who did not want to proceed directly to college after high school. Employers saw evidence in successful military service that the potential worker was both disciplined and trainable, hence employment-ready. Insofar as it offered some military-like experiences, Job Corps also served a screening function.

Is it worth considering whether a judicious investment of federal funds might be used to create more structured work opportunities for young people, furnishing the necessary screening and credentialing without linking the programs to schools or schooling? Some community organizations already run youth employment agencies. Might such efforts be expanded, perhaps in partnership with for-profit temp-agencies that already have the ear of employers? Internships may prove easier to establish as well as fund if they followed graduation from high school or college, rather than trying to integrate the two activities. Would it be possible to establish and promote "work standards" that define the kinds of comportment and customer service skills sought by those who employ young people? McDonalds, already the largest single employer of teenag-

ers, is currently seeking support for just such an approach within the restaurant and fast-food industry.

Would it not be better to have the schools focus on work readiness, while other public and private agencies make the link with employers? Focus group employers suggested that such work readiness programs ought to begin in middle school and proceed through junior and senior high school. They had no difficulty indicating what they want: students who can read and write; who can do complex arithmetic as well as simple math; who can make change, show up on time, and be respectful of customers. They also want employees who know what it means to work hard and who understand that you don't start at the top. These are skills that principally relate to old-fashioned notions of discipline and comportment. The collective advice of the employers in our focus groups was simple and to the point: if you want to improve the quality of the workforce, begin with the basics.

In much the same vein, would it be possible to extend the concept of national service to include a strong work component? It should be possible to provide community service in such a way that the volunteer, in addition to a sense of accomplishment and funds to pay college tuition, comes away from the experience having demonstrated his or her capacity for work. What we have in mind is to make national service more like military service, in that successful completion of an volunteer assignment would be viewed by the employer community as evidence that the volunteer has been both screened and tested and, therefore, is ready for work. Making national service more job-connected would require a redesign of some programs and initiatives, but the pay-off would be substantial in terms of the number of young people, as well as communities, served. Such a reshaping of the program would have the further advantage of articulating that national service is not just for the college-bound.

Our experience with the focus groups also indicates the need to find effective employer organizations with which to work. Perhaps the hallmark of the German apprenticeship system—after which the proposed national system of youth apprenticeships for the United States was modeled—is the central role played by employer associations in providing both leadership and legitimacy to the effort. While few American trade associations are able to match their German counterparts in terms of cohesion and effectiveness, there are opportunities to recruit groups of employers for the task of providing young people with a more rational introduction to the world of work. One of the most interesting groups to which we were introduced during the course of conducting the focus groups was a small-business organization in Cleveland. Some 13,000 strong, the organization owed much of its vitality to operating as a buying cooperative for employee health insurance. If managed care becomes the rule for the provision of health benefits—creating in the process large numbers of employer-owned buying cooperatives—the potential exists for using those same organizations to secure the participation of small firms in particular in youth labor initiatives.

This last suggestion introduces the final point that I want to make. If the small-business owners we talked to were wary about a national program of youth apprenticeships, they were down right suspicious of and occasionally hostile toward the current proposals to enact health care reform. Successfully negotiating health care reform may achieve a great deal toward restoring the legitimacy of federal initiatives in support of societal goals—the kind of legitimacy the youth labor market initiative will certainly require. If health care

reform is not realized and successfully implemented, particularly if its failure is attributable to the hostility of the small-business community, then programs of work readiness that depend on the participation of small businesses will have an all but impossible future. In that case, the prospects are for a continued discounting of the youth labor market; for a tilt in national and state policies that benefit the currently employed, often at the expense of those whose work lives lay largely ahead of them; and for an increasingly embittered youth cohort that sees itself both shut out of the labor market and derided for lacking a work ethic.

Note

[1] Robert Reich, *The Work of Nations: Preparing Ourselves for 21st-Century Capitalism (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1991)*, page 8.

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